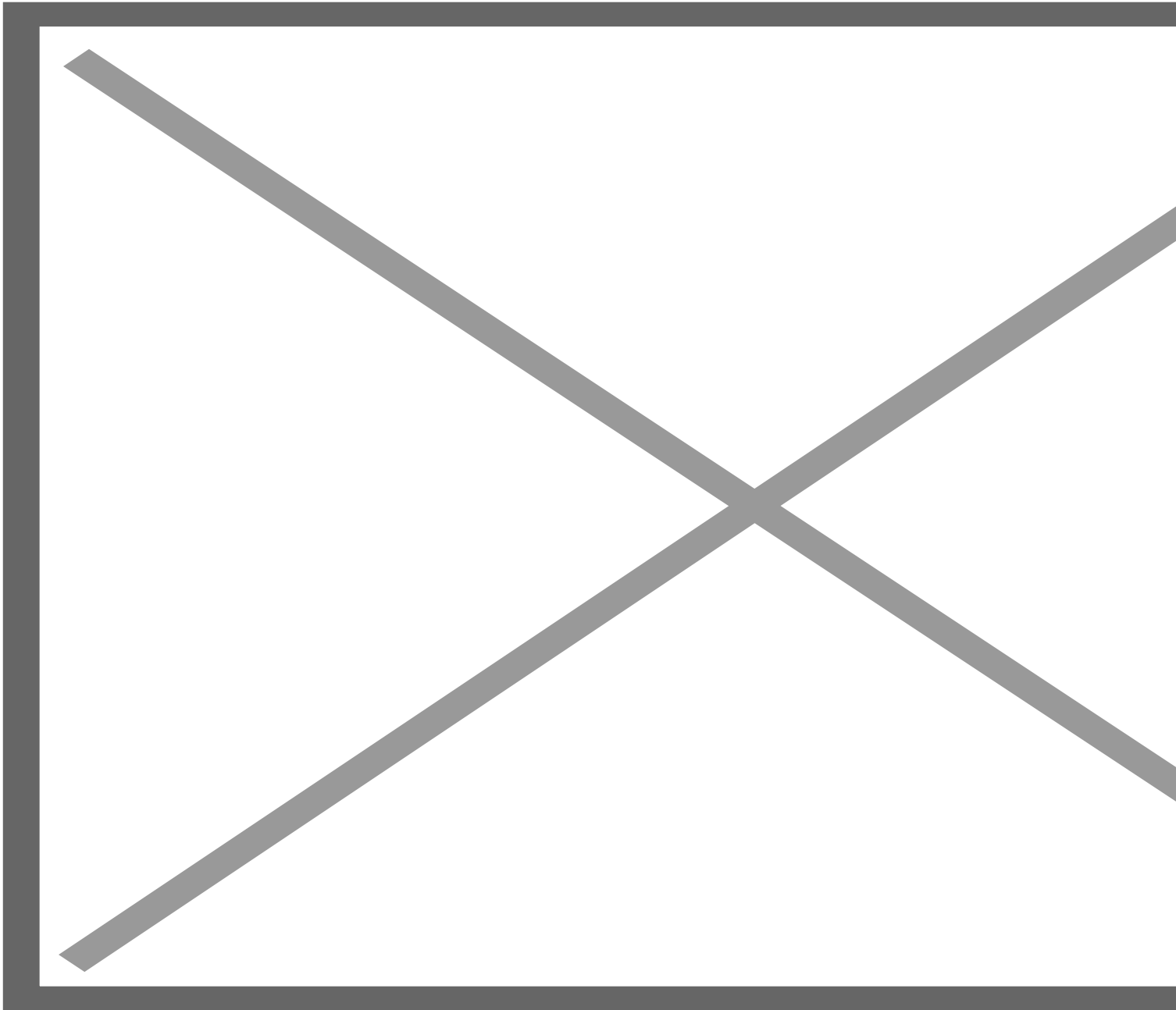


Israel's ban on humanitarian relief groups will severely impact aid to Gaza, letter warns

by [Yonat Shimron](#)

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Palestinians walk past destroyed buildings in the northern Gaza Strip, January 2. (AP Photo/Jehad Alshrafi)

After Israel banned [37 humanitarian groups](#) from operating in the Gaza Strip for their failure to comply with new registration rules, 53 international humanitarian aid organizations issued a joint [letter](#) accusing Israel of severely threatening the delivery of food, shelter, and health care in the territory.

Among the 37 groups whose permits to serve in Gaza were revoked by Israel's Ministry of Diaspora Affairs were the faith-based relief organizations Mercy Corps, World Vision International, Caritas Jerusalem, the American Friends Service Committee, and the Near East Council of Churches. The others are secular organizations, including Doctors Without Borders and CARE. The groups whose registrations were denied are required to cease their activities by March.

The move was immediately [condemned](#) by 10 countries. The foreign ministers of Canada, Denmark, Finland, France, Iceland, Japan, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, and Britain called on Israel to ensure that aid groups can "operate in Gaza in a sustained and predictable way."

Now the humanitarian aid world has spoken out.

"Humanitarian access is not optional, conditional, or political," the aid organizations' [letter](#) states. "It is a legal obligation under international humanitarian law. This move would also set a dangerous precedent by extending Israeli authority over humanitarian operations in the occupied Palestinian territory, contrary to the internationally recognized legal framework governing the territory and the role of the Palestinian Authority."

The letter warns the registration denials "would close health facilities, halt food distributions, collapse shelter pipelines, and cut off life-saving care."

Israel outlined the [new provisions](#) for registering nonprofit aid organizations last year, saying they were intended to prevent Hamas and other militant groups from infiltrating the delivery of aid. They require humanitarian groups to submit lists of their Palestinian employees for review, including their telephone numbers, passport numbers, emails, marital status, and children's names.

The new registration rules also require nonprofits to adhere to a set of political beliefs.

Registration, the guidelines say, can be revoked to any group that "denies the existence of the State of Israel as a Jewish and democratic state," has "called for a boycott of the State of Israel" within the past seven years, or has "expressed support for legal proceedings against Israeli citizens in a foreign country or before an international tribunal." Denying the Holocaust and the October 7, 2023, attack by Hamas are also grounds to be delisted.

"These provisions are very egregious, and there was consensus among the entire international NGO community working in Gaza and in Palestine as a whole to not abide by it because it goes against international humanitarian law, which sets clear boundaries about aid flow and how it should be rapid and that even if there were controls, they have to be proportionate and make sense," said Joyce Ajlouny, general secretary of the American Friends Service Committee, a Quaker-founded organization that works in 17 countries.

Ajlouny said the organization, which has been delivering aid to Gaza since Israel was declared a state in 1948, declined to register because it was not willing to submit information on its Palestinian staff, fearing their lives would be endangered.

It's not clear how many aid groups submitted new registration forms. Caritas Jerusalem, a Catholic humanitarian and development organization, said in a statement that it did not re-register but plans to continue its humanitarian operations in Gaza in accordance with agreements between Israel and the Vatican.

The Israeli unit responsible for implementing civilian policy, known as the Coordination of Government Activities in the Territories, or COGAT, said that the organizations that have had their registration revoked did not supply aid to Gaza during the current ceasefire and, in the past, only accounted for 1 percent of the total volume of aid.

But Ajlouny said some of the groups delisted, including the American Friends Service Committee, provide funding to civil society groups in Gaza that are attempting to rebuild after a devastating two-year war. She worries what will happen to these local groups that have been caring for the health of women, children, and vulnerable people.

She likened the situation to a house on fire. “You have the right to lock your door, but if you have a fire inside your house, you need to open the door to the fire squad to come in and help,” Ajlouny said. “People are burning to death.”

Israel’s decision to act against the aid groups comes at a perilous time for Palestinians in the occupied territories and especially in Gaza, where Israeli authorities have continued to reject shipments of aid to the besieged territory, despite a ceasefire declared in September after two years of Israeli bombardment. Gaza’s residents are malnourished and living in tents that have been flooded by recent rains, according to the United Nations and news reports.

Separately, Israel’s Parliament on December 29 passed [legislation](#) removing diplomatic immunity for staff members from the UN’s agency for Palestinian refugees, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency, known as UNRWA. The legislation could expose UNRWA to legal action. Israel had already banned the group after the October 7, 2023, Hamas attack on Israel, saying it had become infiltrated by the armed group.

In 2016 Israel arrested a Gaza-based World Vision staffer, Mohammad El Halabi, and in 2022 an Israeli court convicted him of diverting funds to Hamas. World Vision, one of the largest humanitarian aid groups in the world, denied the allegations of financial irregularity. The group now works in the West Bank but not Gaza.
—Religion News Service